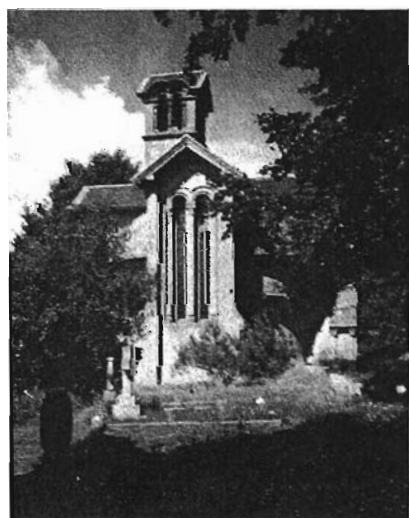


WATTS CHAPEL

by Elisabeth Beazley

The little-known building described below, with the help of drawings by John Furnival and photographs by Eric de Maré, is one of Britain's few surviving monuments to the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement; a chapel at Compton, Surrey, designed in 1896 by Mary Watts, wife of G. F. Watts, R.A. One of its surprising features is the gesso-work that covers the whole of the interior, modestly described by Mary Watts as 'glorified wall-paper'.



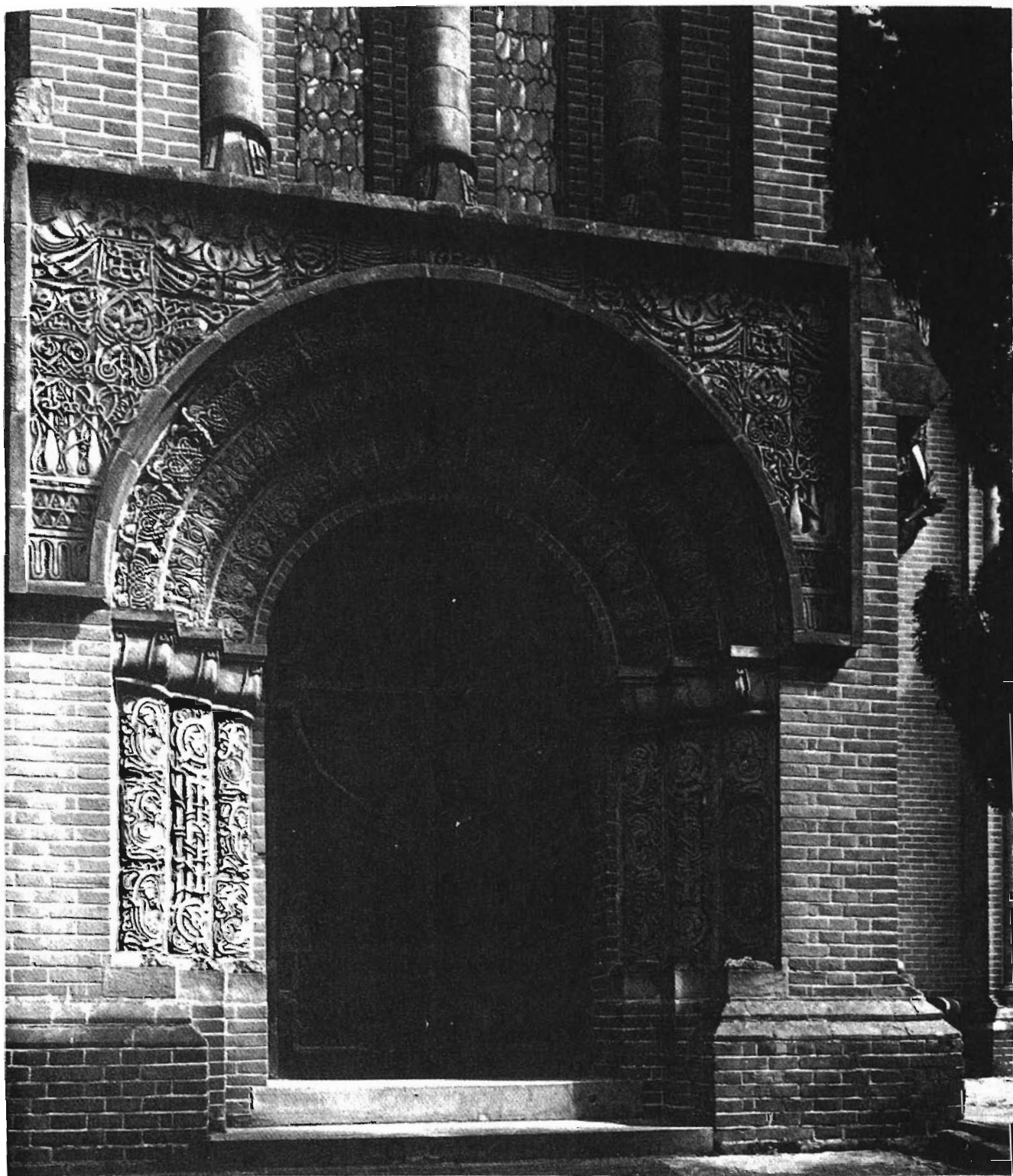
1. The exterior, of hard red brick roofed with Roman tiles.

Buildings can arouse all kinds of emotion: admiration, awe, derision, depression, amusement . . . For straightforward astonishment it is unnecessary to go further than Compton, Surrey. On the altar in the Watts memorial chapel, an inscription states 'This chapel, designed by Mrs. Watts, wife of G. F. Watts, O.M., R.A., was built in 1896 by her and the people of Compton.' This alone would be enough to whet the curiosity, but when seen in its context further information about this remarkable building and its builders becomes imperative. For, instead of being homespun, amateur or earthy, as might justifiably be expected from such a description, it is an expert, highly successful if unusual realisation of a unique idea. It also forms part of an interesting (historically rather than architecturally) group of buildings which must be one of the few remaining monuments in brick and mortar to the ideals of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement.

Towards the end of his long life, Watts,¹ who for many years had been the grand old man of British painting but who was still working at a furious rate, decided to leave London for Compton. It would be truer to say that Mrs. Watts decided; this remarkable woman apparently had the happy knack of not only making the right decisions for Watts, but of also being a charming and sympathetic wife. Thirty years younger than her husband, Mary Watts seems to have provided the energy and drive which were behind the creation of Limnerslease, the house which they built in the depths of Surrey.

Both the Watts's were deeply fond of this wooded country and spent prolonged stays with friends here, but Watts, who was now in his 70s, was fussed by visiting. His special diet (under-cooked beef and fresh cream), the fear that he might be ill while away and cause further inconvenience to his hostess and, above all, the paraphernalia of packing and unpacking, worrying about missing trains (all of which time and energy might have been spent painting) must have made things difficult for everyone. Therefore, Limnerslease was the perfect solution. So perfect that the Watts's soon left London altogether and made it their permanent home. This meant that in addition to the studio, a gallery must be built to house Watts's paintings. Of these buildings there is not much to say architecturally; the house with its mock timbering was in the vanguard of thousands that have since come to Surrey. It has a fine site high above the other buildings; it must have been a pleasant place to live in, being so closely surrounded by, yet above, the trees (the Watts's apparently would not allow a single tree to be felled when the house was built). It was designed by Sir Ernest George and is now converted into flats.

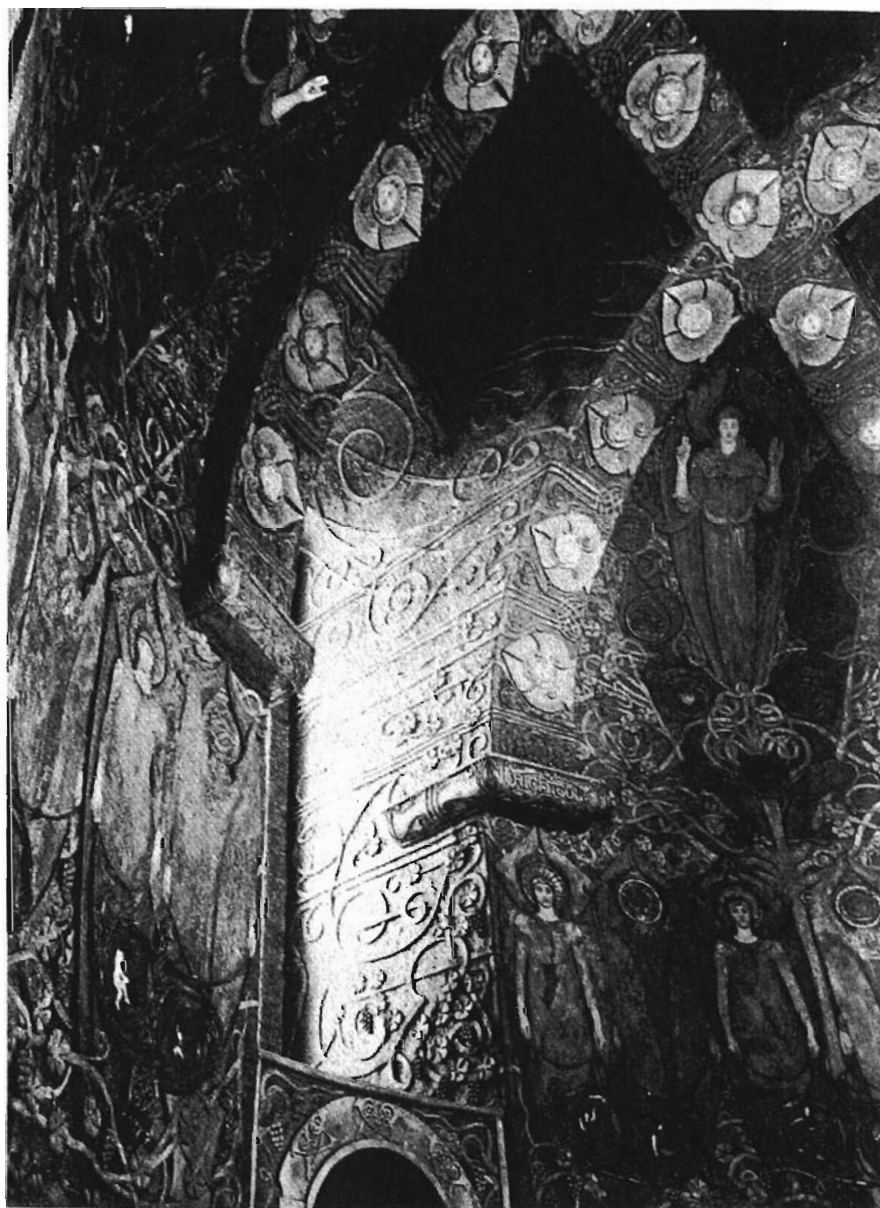
The house, which is about half a mile north-east of Compton village, decided the siting of the gallery and potteries and hostel for potters that were to follow it. This was most fortunate, as the group forms a separate entity and does not compete with the old village and the remarkably fine Norman church. The pottery (which only ceased to function in the 1950s) was another of Mary's ideas, although closely backed by Watts. She had run a pottery-class for workers in Whitechapel. The idea of training the locals crystallised when a new burial-ground and mortuary chapel were needed for the village. This is best described by Mrs. Watts in her *Life of G. F. Watts*²: 'A new interest had grown up for us both in the last two years, the building of a chapel for the new village burial ground, his gift to Compton. He did not design it, but suggested that if we proposed to hold a class, the people of Compton



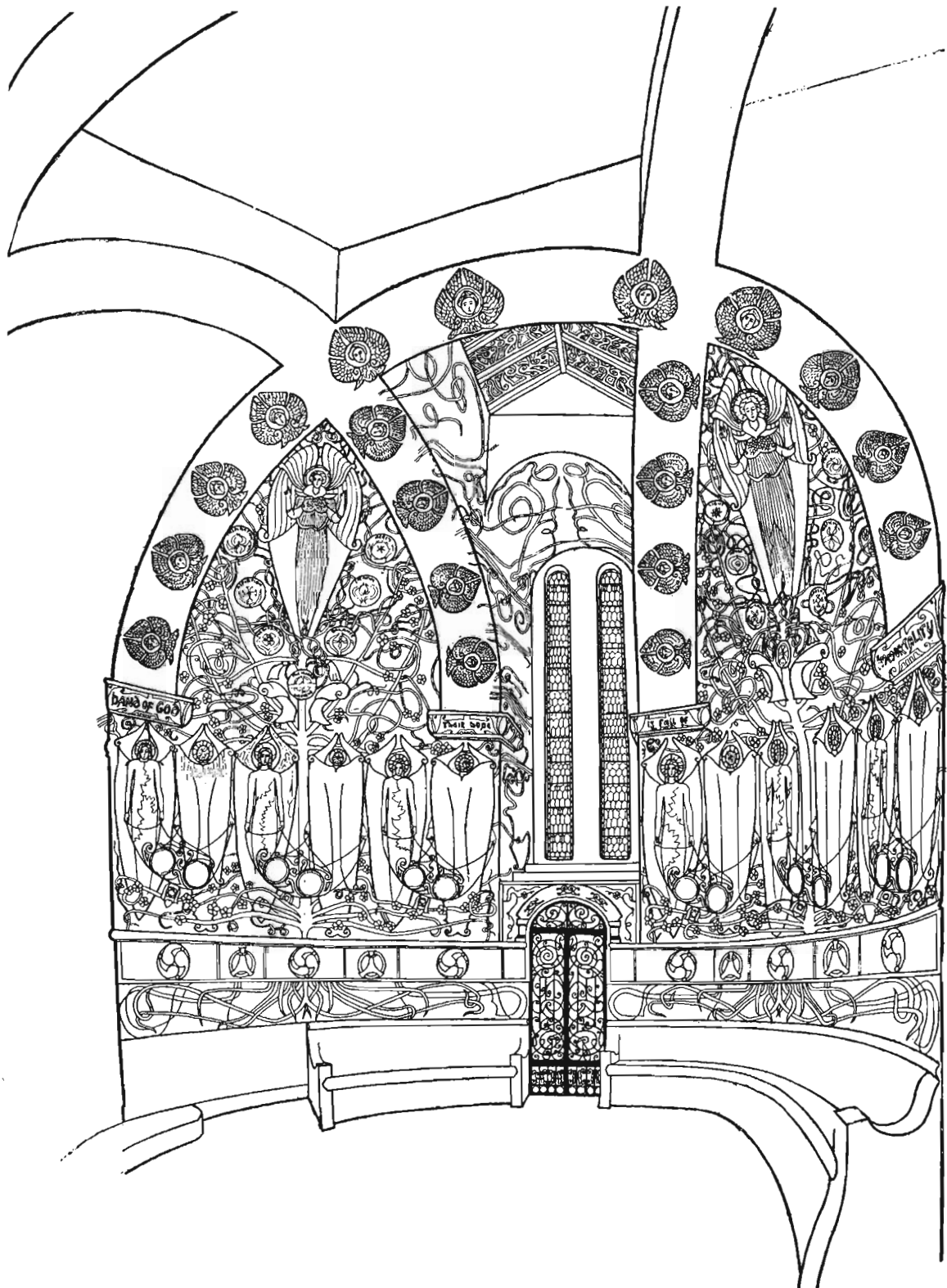
2. The richly decorated main doorway.

might like to come to it and be taught to make simple patterns to decorate the walls; so that by this means a special and personal interest in the new graveyard would be acquired by the workers.'

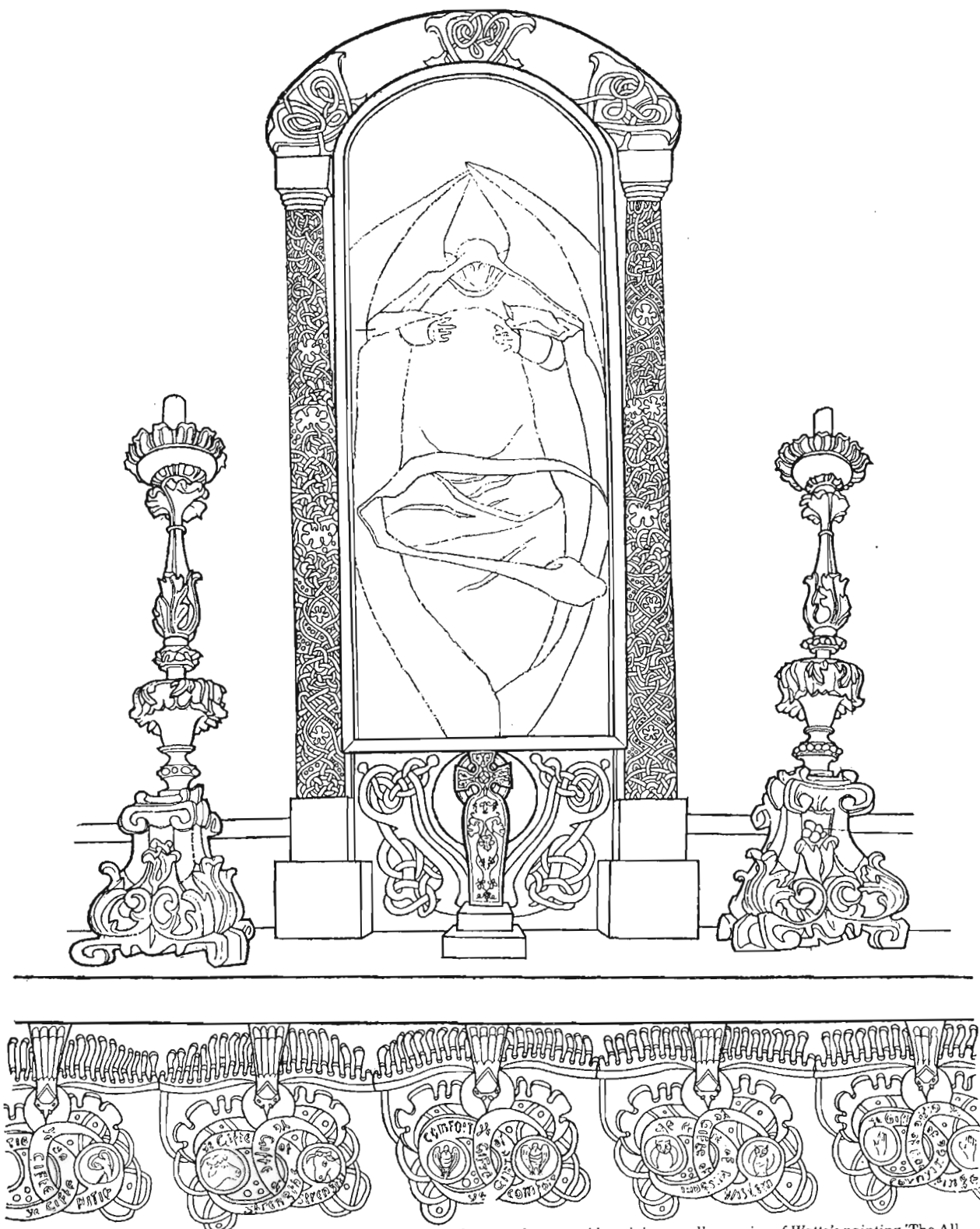
This mild description and a slim volume called *The Word in Pattern*³, also by Mrs. Watts, are all that is known to have been written about this remarkable chapel. Far from being amateurish, it is a building of remarkable expertise, not only in execution, a factor which could be attributed to the skill of the builder, but in the assurance and mastery with which the complexity of the original idea has been disciplined so that the parts never detract from the whole. At the end of *The Word in Pattern*, a list is given of those who had worked on the chapel (seventy-one men and women worked on the terra-cotta; often several members of a family are mentioned), but the only designer mentioned is a Mr. George Redmayne who was responsible for the door-hinges. From this it seems reasonable to assume that Mrs. Watts designed the building without professional help.



3. A detail of the elaborate gesso-work that covers the whole interior, described by Mary Watts as 'glorified wall-paper'.



4. A drawing of the interior by John Furnival.

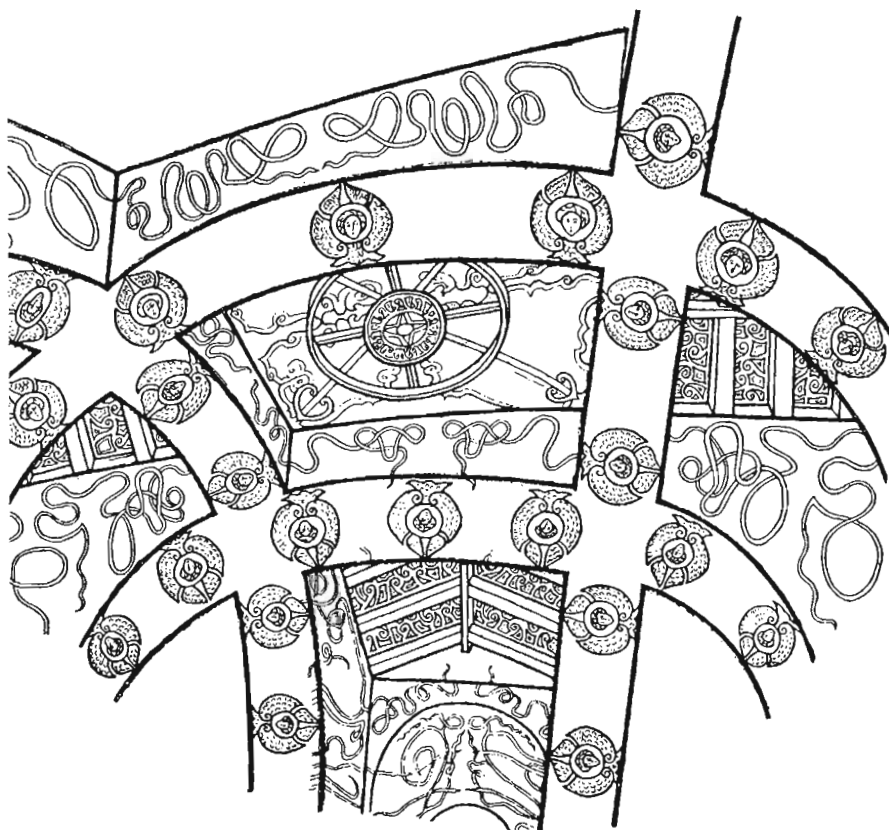


5. The altar, facing the main doorway. Above it is a smaller version of Watts's painting 'The All Pervading', and along the edge of the altar slab is the inscription: 'This chapel, designed by Mrs. Watts, wife of G. F. Watts, O.M., R.A., was built in 1896 by her and the people of Compton.'

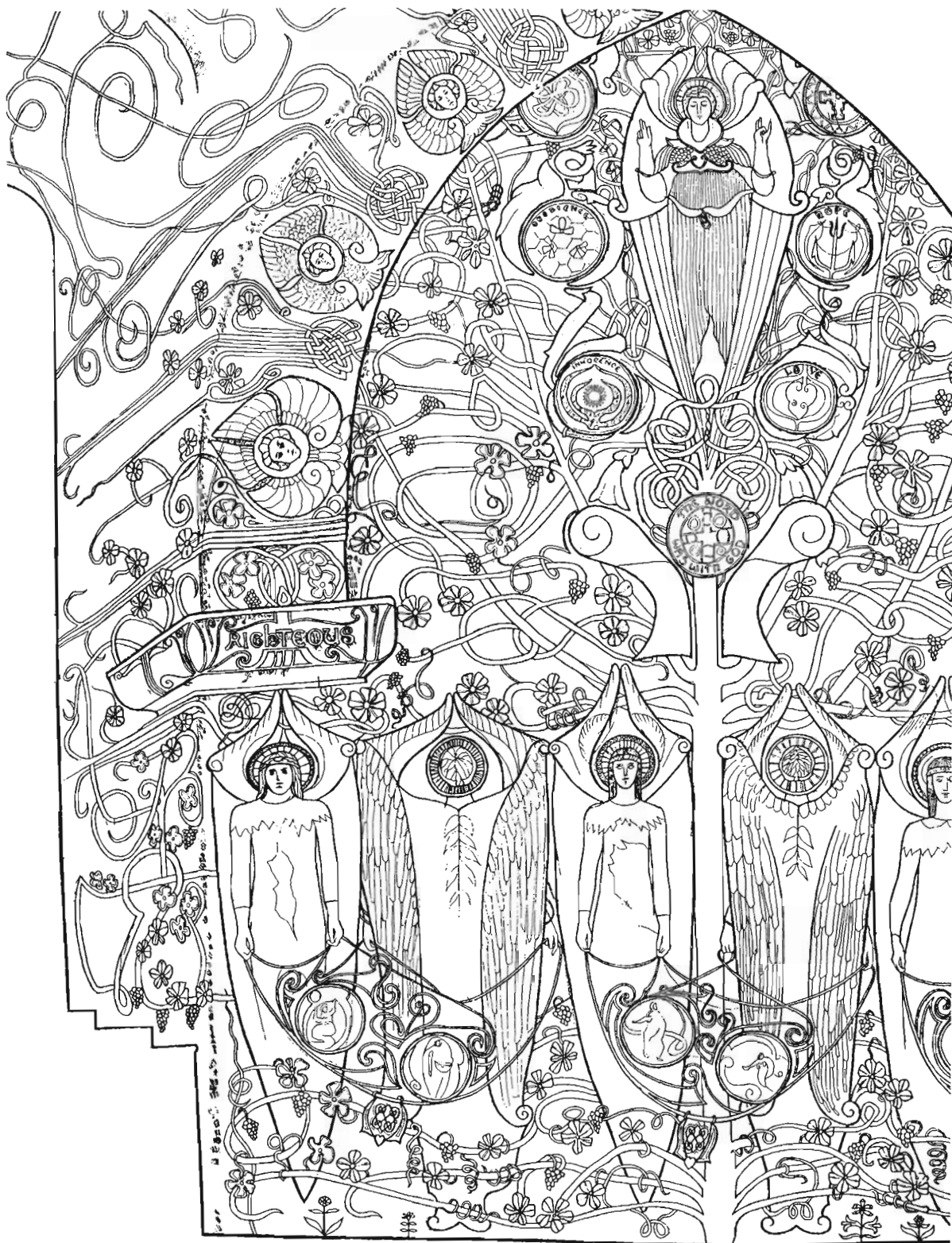
The chapel stands on rising ground looking across meadow-land to Compton village. It is approached from below up a narrow curving path which is lined by black Irish yews. These trees hide the building until you are almost upon it, and this, together with their blackness contrasting with the very red brick of which it is built, add drama and surprise to the approach. The bricks, which were made locally, may also have been a surprise to Mrs. Watts who, if one can judge by the other buildings, favoured mellow materials. They still look as if fired yesterday and have the texture and colour of a recently rubbed rubber-brick. This is an advantage because much of the building is faced by terra-cotta mouldings, and these, which naturally will not weather, and the plain brickwork, have remained approximately the same colour, giving the wall surfaces a unity that would never have been retained if a normal brick had been used.

Since it is a small building, whose surface is deeply broken by shadow, the green English countryside can take the shock. The roof is covered with Roman tiles. It is probably these, and perhaps the yew trees which stand as sentinels as cypresses do in Greece, rather than any architectural style, that makes the exterior slightly reminiscent of a renovated Byzantine church (e.g. those in the fortress of Mistra.)

Approaching from below, one is right up to the door and already too amazed by the galaxy of angels and symbolism in the terra-cotta over the door to pause before plunging inside. The impression is of being inside a circular building with massively thick walls and, fleetingly only, of a domed ceiling. Colour and low-relief pattern cover almost every surface, and an extraordinary richness is achieved. It is a mixture of Bavarian Rococo and Art Nouveau with colours taken from the sea bed. The light, coming in at high level and catching remnants of the gold on blue-green



6. The main roof supported by four arches;
timber rafters outside the crossing.



7. Low relief decoration, built up in plaster and string.

paint, deepens the illusion of being in a pool of clear water.

But these are impressions only. What has in fact been most ingeniously designed is a cruciform plan on which is imposed a thin drum of $13\frac{1}{2}$ inch brickwork, approximately 24 feet in diameter. The arms of the cross project 6 feet 2 inches beyond the drum, and rise the full height of the building, while the drum is only about two-thirds the height of the main walls (for this reason, the projecting 'transepts' cannot be thought of as buttresses). The window openings are in the end walls of the cross. The impression thus given to anyone inside the building is of immensely thick walls, since the window reveals are the full depth of the arms of the cross from its extremities to the inner surface of the drum. This ingenious if unintentional trick seems an economic way to give apparent weight of masonry with minimum material.

The roof is simply a cross-ridged structure supported on four semicircular arches where the drum cuts off the walls where it meets the cruciform. There is clearly no excuse for imagining a dome, even if the building was entered blindfold with no awareness of its outer form; however, the circular plan of the interior, together with the round arches decorated in the same material as the walls, gives this fleeting illusion.

8. Terracotta decoration on the upper part of the exterior of the drum, which fills the angles of the cruciform plan of the church and gives the interior the effect of a circular building.





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9. The seats along the outside wall of the chapel, designed and made in the Watts workshop.

10. The cloister.

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The decoration of the interior suggests a woven tapestry. It may have been inspired by Watts's saying: 'All creation is the garment of God'; certainly all parts of the design were of deep significance to its creator. From the stone seat that runs round the inside of the building upwards, every inch of the interior is decorated. Angels, medallions, children's heads, take their place in an orderly but flowing design of abstract strap patterns of Art Nouveau, in low relief. 'A solid plastic material called Gesso, its substance plaster of Paris in which a fibrous material is soaked' was the medium in which Mary Watts worked. In places the fibre (like string) has been built up to give reliefs up to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch deep. This depth gives pattern and life even where the actual paint has faded, and the richness achieved is remarkable. It is sad that the only drab thing about the chapel is the picture specially painted to go above the altar. It is a smaller version of Watts's 'The All Pervading' and badly needs restoring. Mary Watts's modest comment on her astonishing



11. A terracotta well-head near the gate; also a product of the Watts workshop.

achievement is 'He (G. F. Watts) had not before realised what I aspired to do in this glorified wall paper.'

The decoration of the exterior is extremely complex and is based largely on Celtic patterns. Almost every design is symbolic, and anyone wanting to study it in detail should refer to Mrs. Watts's explanatory book. It must be one of the last great craft efforts; each piece of terra-cotta has its special significance and few if any are alike (each of the fifteen angels over the door, to take but one instance, has a different face). But what really astonishes is the organised restraint which has prevented this highly imaginative Victorian woman running riot with terra-cotta; the drum, apart from the corbelled frieze, and a large part of the projecting cruciform are built in plain brickwork. In other words, the walls are either highly decorated or completely plain. In this it has something in common with the exterior of Seljuk buildings, whose decoration is so intense that it can only be taken with large areas of plain walling as a foil. The bricks, incidentally, are only 1½ inches deep; the small scale thus achieved gives the impression of a larger building.

In the graveyard there are a number of graves made by the potteries, and also a cloister (very inferior to the chapel). The hostel where the non-village potters lived is now the curator's house. Both it and the Gallery⁴ (designed by Christopher Turner) were originally thatched. The Gallery contains a large and varied collection of Watts's paintings. That they are varied is hardly surprising when it is remembered that he lived during five reigns, including the longest in British history, and worked with extraordinary energy through most of them. The fascinating paintings (all by Watts) range from what might well be late eighteenth-century portraits onwards to early twentieth - Picasso was already twenty-five when this child of George III's reign, friend of Ruskin and sculptor of Tennyson, died.

NOTES

¹ For biography of G. F. Watts see *The Laurel and the Thorn*, by Ronald Chapman (Faber & Faber).

² Published by Macmillan.

³ Published by the Astolat Press.

⁴ The Gallery is open to the public. Compton is about two miles west of Guildford.